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Forensic identification and identity politics in 2004 post-tsunami Thailand: Negotiating dissolving boundaries

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Abstract

This article considers the contexts and processes of forensic identification in 2004 post-tsunami Thailand as examples of identity politics. The presence of international forensic teams as carriers of diverse technical expertise overlapped with bureaucratic procedures put in place by the Thai government. The negotiation of unified forensic protocols and the production of estimates of identified nationals straddle biopolitics and 'thanatocracy'. The immense identification task testified on the one hand to an effort to bring individual bodies back to mourning families and national soils, and on the other hand to determining collective ethnic and national bodies, making sense out of an inexorable and disordered dissolution of corporeal as well as political boundaries. Individual and national identities were the subject of competing efforts to bring order to the chaos, reaffirming the cogency of the body politic by mapping national boundaries abroad. The overwhelming forensic effort required by the exceptional circumstances also brought forward the socio-economic and ethnic disparities of the victims, whose post-mortem treatment and identification traced an indelible divide between 'us' and 'them'.

Keywords: Tsunami, Thailand, forensics, identity politics, biopolitics

Introduction

On the early morning of 26 December 2004 a megathrust earthquake of magnitude 9.0[1] occurred off the west coast of Northern Sumatra in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Located 30 km under the seabed, the quake originated a series of tsunami waves and heralded one of the greatest disasters triggered by natural hazards, and concomitant humanitarian aid efforts, in contemporary history. Although exact figures of the number of victims are difficult to determine, at least 250,000 people are considered to have lost their lives or are presumed dead and 1.7 million people were displaced in fourteen countries. The most affected region surrounding the Indian Ocean comprised Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. Among the dead were a large number of European visitors holidaying for the Christmas and New Year vacations, mainly in Thailand and Sri Lanka. While countries hit by disasters usually process the resulting dead themselves, the presence of the tsunami's Western victims prompted over thirty international Disaster Victim Identification (DVI)[2] teams to converge in Thailand, where the predominant European deaths had taken place.[3] Teams faced technical, bureaucratic and diplomatic problems establishing a shared effective identification procedure. Contributing to the organisational difficulties were the extremely large numbers of corpses, their location and retrieval, and the rapid decomposition process that was accelerated due to the effects of sea water, humidity, high temperatures and the lack of appropriate refrigeration. The bodies of victims were not just detrimentally affected by the decomposition process but were also battered and wounded by the violence of the tsunami waves themselves, carrying debris as they engulfed the coastal areas. The wall of water that surged inland destroyed all things with which it came into contact. The sheer weight of the water was sufficient to pulverise objects in its path[4] and bodies were often found with clothes torn from them.[5]

In Thailand temporary mortuary sites were set up in Buddhist temples in three geographical areas. The first site was located in Khao Lak, Takua Pa district (Phang Nga province), the second in

Phuket and the third in Krabi.[6] Phang Nga temples became a global morgue or, using the concept suggested by Mbembé, a *death world*.[7] The first documented Thai forensic teams arrived in the affected areas on 27 December, the day after the tsunami.[8] These teams consisted of forensic, academic and other relevant professionals who self-reported to the disaster sites and set up basic identification facilities at local temples.[9] The Thai forensic teams undertook examinations of about 3,600 cadavers, including an external examination, photography and recording of personal effects.[10] Multiple international teams arrived by the second week and worked at each site.[11] During the early days after the tsunami approximately 500 corpses were identified at the scene by family members and over 1,100 bodies were released to relatives by local physicians and Thai police.[12]

Identity politics and identification politics

It is difficult to gain a consensus on the actual number of people killed by the tsunami. Looking at the statistics produced by governments, international agencies and several publications these numerical assessments changed over time, and constitute in themselves an arena of dispute, besides being one of the privileged techniques of governmentality.[13] The number of identified bodies is part of this contention. India suffered around 16,000 dead, Sri Lanka had over 35,000 and Indonesia over 160,000.[14] In Thailand approximately 6,000 people died with over half of these being foreign tourists from over forty countries, including Sweden which had the highest of all Western victims.[15] While Thailand had the smallest death toll it was the focus of the largest DVI response, with international teams of forensic experts assisting in the identification and disposal of the dead. The disfigurement of the bodies and their rapid decomposition seemed to exemplify the body as 'the site of common human vulnerability'.[16]

Following the disaster, in Thailand the dead were collected in a largely uncoordinated way by survivors, police, military personnel and local volunteer groups and loaded onto trucks and taken to temple sites. No records were kept of which bodies had been found where, or which were found

together. At the temple sites bodies were laid out in rows, several hundred at a time.[17] Initially there was little consensus on how to best manage the huge identification process that was required.

There was insufficient refrigerated storage available immediately following the disaster, and it took roughly two weeks for about 100 containers to arrive for storing the gathering bodies.[18] Makeshift awnings were placed as protection from the sun, and dry ice was used in an attempt to slow the decomposition process, though initially this caused further problems of burning by direct application of the ice directly onto the corpses.[19] Due to the initial lack of refrigeration facilities and the advanced decomposition of the bodies, local authorities began to bury victims in shallow mass trench graves as a means of temporary storage until identification could begin, in an attempt to lower the temperature and slow down decomposition.[20] Temporary burial in Thailand was performed for 700–900 'Asian' bodies, to be recovered at a later point for identification purposes.[21] These burials, however, led to accusations of attempts to bury bodies without correct identification.[22] They were eventually all exhumed after a few days because of the possibility that Western bodies could have been erroneously classified and buried alongside these.[23]

One of the most important aspects of mass disaster investigations is the identification of the deceased,[24] especially for permitting appropriate burial and facilitating the mourning process of relatives and survivors. The countries worst hit in terms of death toll – Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka – were largely left to deal with their own dead with little or no international DVI assistance. Sri Lanka had a brief international presence but each DVI team pulled out of the country once all their nationals had been identified.[25] Black notes that while over 30 DVI teams were sent to Thailand within days of the tsunami, they were primarily mobilised to facilitate repatriation matters of their own nationals only.[26] This led to animosity with local populations.[27] The emergency response and DVI work should not add to the distress of the affected communities.[28] The situation testified to the fact that whereas a common human vulnerability of the body was initially assumed as the hallmark of an unprecedented disaster equally affecting 'us' and 'them', it was not long

before inequalities emerged and with them a parallel 'hierarchy of grief' so that some bodies and their stories became more visible (certainly as accounted for in global media reporting) while others were omitted and in a certain sense even de-realised.[29] Opposed to media outlets of a concerted global humanitarian effort, this rather parochial approach initially hindered the larger operation, though eventually better communication prevailed.

The identification process was rendered more difficult by variations in procedures depending on the DVI teams' country of origin and could include different experts, forensic anthropologists, dentists and pathologists.[30] In the weeks following the tsunami forensic scientists and police organisations began to develop standards for identifying individuals based upon their practical experiences.[31] The Thai authorities reached an agreement that the international teams would work with the Royal Thai police and the Thai forensic experts. The multinational DVI centre, later renamed Thai Tsunami Victim Identification (TTVI) centre, was established in mid-January 2005 in Phuket and managed by the Thai Royal Police; it was run by 460 forensic experts from Thailand and 30 foreign teams.[32] The Australian government provided financial support for the committee's information centre, while the Norwegian government sponsored a central mortuary.[33] It was established that the DVI System International software (based upon Interpol procedures) would be used, including the use of ante-mortem (yellow) and post-mortem (pink) forms as standard to collect data about the deceased.[34]

The yellow forms record the most current known data about a missing individual and the pink form is used to record all findings from the forensic analysis of the body. Both forms are divided into sections from A to G.[35] The yellow form starts with section A on the personal information about the missing person while in the pink form section A details the recovery of the body. All other sections of the forms, such as data on personal belongings, dental and medical histories, and other information that may assist identification such as the presence of tattoos, are equal. The forms are thus completed by a number of different forensic specialists and the process of identification becomes atomised and parcelled. Identification comes from a retrospective review of

the ante-mortem and post-mortem forms and the relevant information is compared.[36] The guidelines for establishing identity of a victim require at least two different methods of a positive match such as fingerprints and dental evidence.[37] Once evidence for identifying an individual was considered sufficient, a case report was compiled outlining the reasons for the identification. This was then presented to the Reconciliation Board of the TTVI Commission (TTVIC) and if the Board accepted the evidence a death certificate was issued.[38] Before the reports were presented to the Board all identifications were authorised by the TTVIC Commander as part of a final quality control process. The signature of the Commander was only an acknowledgement that the report had been compiled following DVI protocols and was not determining that the identification had been accepted. It was in fact an acknowledgement of procedural correctness. Authorisation for the final identification could only come from senior Thai officials in their capacity as the Chair of the Identification Commission.[39]

By the use of the agreed system, and the hegemonic decision to adopt the Interpol system, an attempt to control and standardise conducts was being placed upon forensics as well as bodies, further maintained by the requirement of a Board to legally confirm corpses' status *as dead*.

> [L]ife course transitions in particular can produce states of body-based categorical ambiguity within which it becomes unclear as to whether someone is 'alive' or 'dead', whether they constitute a social being of some kind or simply a material trace.[40]

The legal requirement for identification took the place of the actual naming of a victim proper. The need, however, for the imposition of national identity onto the dead is highlighted by the German team who implemented their own additional dental check outside of the Interpol guidelines before they would release an identified German victim, as a control of plausibility.[41] Forensic experts must negotiate multiple evidential regimes between the competing demands of the living and the dead, as well as those who are an integral part of forensic identification.[42]

This aspect of documental accuracy responded to the need of the family to obtain legal documents to start inheritance and insurance procedures.[43] It also bears witness to the entrenched competitiveness between the Thai Royal Police forensic expertise and the Central Institute of Forensic Studies, polarised by the location of the two identification centres, in Phuket and Wat Yanyao respectively. Nearly 4,000 bodies were moved from Wat Yanyao to Phuket to be re-identified following Interpol protocols[44]; only Thai bodies were left behind to Dr. Pornthip for verification. Need for accuracy took over the need for identification.

The assessment for handling the dead was based largely on the level of devastation in each region.[45] Nations hit hardest such as Indonesia were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of bodies found within a largely destroyed infrastructure. The appropriate and efficient method decided upon for the human remains' disposal was mass burial, despite how painful it may be for the families.[46] These localities did not have a large number of foreigners either and international demands for identification procedures were not pressed. The ethnic and religious homogeneous composition of the Indonesian locals led to faster inhumation. If there had not been foreigners among the dead in Thailand, it seems likely that some victims would have been initially visually identified and the rest cremated or buried in mass graves.[47] Due to Thailand's dependence on revenue from tourism, and that the tsunami had struck a tourist area, the country was thus anxious to do what was necessary to satisfy the concerns of the foreign governments who wanted the dead identified and repatriated, and requested efficiency in the process.[48]

It was the risk that people's identities could not be confidently determined that led to concerns over the processing of the dead and prevented appropriate burial. In a mass disaster event involving individuals of diverse nationalities, the management of dead bodies can become a process fraught with political and diplomatic complexities. Loss of proper identification and burial is accompanied by loss of personal identity, of national belonging and, ultimately, by the impossibility of repatriation.[49] Still months after the tsunami, bodies were retrieved in such a state of deterioration that it was initially difficult to establish if they belonged to humans or animals.[50] This

decomposition process removes the lived identities, generally perceived for individuals as multiple and distinct, and creates a homogenous death population as a spectral new identity, where visual identification is unreliable and nearly impossible without other means.

Identification process

The lack of identification as an element of vulnerability related variously to different groups. The vulnerability to disaster was replicated and reconstructed in the process of identification by the co-presence of: different degrees of technical preparation by national forensic teams; different economic capacities to organise forensic teams and repatriation; illegal migrants' lack of documentation and actual repercussions for families in the identification process (if *in situ*). In this paucity of documentation, the bodies of 83 Burmese who were identified could not be repatriated due to the lack of cooperation of Burmese authorities, with the embassy in Thailand refusing to certify that the bodies were in fact Burmese.[51] Identification of local Thais was equally hindered by the loss of potential medical documentation amid the rubble and debris caused by the wave.

'[O]ur embodied subjectivities are intimately linked to and shaped by our geopolitical locations within nation-states.'[52] In the aftermath of the tsunami, however, these geopolitical locations also mattered outside of nation states, in a transferrable trade of embodied trans-nationalities. The body politic calls upon the relation between the human body and the political order as an analogy,[53] the problem of identity related to one reflects onto the other, because of the relation of the individual body's identity with the body politic.[54] The body politic governs the body natural; if the body natural obliterates management and control, the body politic also fails.

> A successful identification process can be defined as a rapid and correct establishment of a lost person's identity and appropriate communication of this identity to the family and loved ones.[55]

Initial attempts at identification were made from the photographs of the bodies that were taken on arrival at the temple sites. Most bodies, however, had passed beyond visual facial recognition within forty-eight hours of death. These images were shown to surviving family members but the process was quickly halted when it became apparent that it was causing distress to the families. Some attempts at recreating facial appearance from soft tissues were made by forensic artists, particularly on the remains of children.[56] The images were cleaned to remove debris, and clothing was highlighted. The effects of decomposition were eliminated and characteristic facial features were emphasised in an attempt to stimulate recognition.[57] Some remains were claimed on the basis of visual recognition but mistakes were inevitably made.

The heat and humidity of the tropics led to rapidly advancing decomposition due to a combination of autolysis and putrefaction, which complicated the handling of the victims and also severely impeded the visual identification process. Changes occur to the skin, with the epidermis detaching from the body, leaving un-pigmented skin that can at first give the appearance of a white cadaver, even in dark skinned individuals. This is a reason for some confusion between Western and Thai individuals, determination additionally often being decided upon due to the presence of beach attire or hair colour and type. Injuries to the body also impact upon visual identification. The usual changes to the body include putrefactive purging of fluids from body orifices, venous marbling, blistering and discolouration of the skin, and swelling of the body cavities. Another prominent feature was the extension and lifting of limbs due to so-called putrefactive rigor mortis.[58] This is seen extensively in the bodies that were laid out in the open air in Thailand's temple sites and feature prominently on websites and articles about the tsunami dead.

While it has been established that social identities persist despite the absence of bodies,[59] we point at the fact that the tsunami identification context posed a challenge of social identities' dissolution, paralleling the dissolution of bodies, despite the encumbering presence of the latter. These bodies conveyed a kind of materiality that erases recognisable marks of social and ethnic

differences. Identification here is not only the term describing the technical procedure of identity's forensic establishment, but also the process of identity-making itself.[60] As objects and practices after death inform about the socialisation of the dead,[61] the post-tsunami process of identification also became a massive generator of sociality and relations. 'At either end of the life course, therefore, the body-to-be and the body-that-was, in their parallel invisibility, constitute powerful focuses for representation and identification.'[62]

Visibility, invisibility and mediated hypervisibility

There is a specific relation between visual evidence, post-Enlightenment, and truth.[63] The process of *social autopsy* that Klinenberg identifies as operating in the Chicago 1995 heat wave, which was never considered seriously in political circles, could be extended to the tsunami context.[64]

> The bodies served, instead, as a double distraction from the sociological issues that the heat wave might have made visible: first as commodified spectacles, in the media representation of the crisis; second, as scientifically defined objects, in the narrowly medical attribution of the deaths.[65]

The 'images of the body-that-was' are generally edited or representing a younger self for future memory, generating '"disembodied" social identities'.[66] But in the context of the tsunami identification there was a photographic presence of disfigurement on display that is not a standard event in the treatment of the bereaveds' images.

Walls full of pictures of the victims while alive are incomparable to the actual physiognomy of the corpses. Walls became monuments for the 'missing' but not aides for identification. They were also filled with pictures of the corpses, blackened, disfigured, with swollen bodies and faces,

often carrying an identification label indicating the sex: '*phu chai*' (man), '*phu ying*' (woman). Relatives were asked to recognise pictures that were unrecognisable.

Autobiographies of bereavement demonstrate that the continuing corporeal presence becomes de-personalised, the 'body' remains but the person is no longer present.[67] We witness a de-personalisation of the corporeal presence. '[T]he ocular ethic represents the responsibility that comes from seeing or perceiving bodies *and* identifying and recovering those bodies that are unseen or less exposed to public view. It is at the same time a presumptuous and political act with weighty consequences to engage in this enterprise.'[68] Yet visual identification often goes wrong – people take the wrong body. In a complete reversal of priority, for the survivors and families the need for a 'body' is greater than the need for accuracy, the want of the living is imposed over the agency of the dead body. Because the body loses its individuality and agency a biological identity is imposed upon it.

Many of the early problems in the tsunami identification programme arose from the inability to carry out the first step of separating Asian from European deceased individuals with any degree of reliability.[69] This inability led to considerable international acrimony that was sufficiently vociferous to actually threaten the continuation of the whole international DVI programme.[70] This in itself has its own problems in that international countries such as Australia can have a mixed demographic including many citizens of Asian descent. The distinction between ethnicity and nationality here is a large biopolitical problem.

An order of priority was formed, in which Western bodies were given the greatest accuracy of identification, followed by less accurate processes for Thai nationals and other Asian tourists, ending with the Burmese migrants who 'were given the lowest priority and the least attention'. In relation to separating bodies on ethnic grounds at one point leading forensic expert Dr. Pornthip is reported saying it was impossible to separate the bodies as they started liquefying.[71]

A similar forensic and political tragedy of missing and unidentified Western bodies abroad – the identification process for US MIA soldiers from the Vietnam War – continues in Southeast Asia

today, with annual search team missions to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.[72] The process of identification is an affirmation of knowledge, demonstrated via technological prowess.[73] If for the USA 'to recover and rehabilitate the individual body speaks to the renewal and strengthening of the collective body',[74] for the international forensic teams in Thailand the capability to identify their own citizens also represented a demonstration of the body politics' strength.[75]

> It is not just mortality that is a problem, but rather the processes of disease, decay and decomposition that inhabit the very ontology of the body politic concept itself.[76]

'Bioavailability' is a concept introduced by Lawrence Cohen 'to describe the likelihood for a person or population that its tissues may be disaggregated and transferred to some other entity or process'.[77] This process is generally understood as the availability of the tissues of the poor. We could read the massive identification process after the tsunami, especially the need to transfer DNA samples to specialised laboratories abroad, as a specific battle on bioavailaility's grounds, where wealthy bodies' documentations and DNA travelled and became part of a complex bureaucratic process.

Forensic methods and the sociality of evidence

Forensic post-mortem operations were eventually conducted following standardised Interpol protocols in order to optimise the collection and interpretation of data. The system led to a number of stages being followed:[78]

> 1. A unique identifier was assigned to every examined corpse that included the telephone country code of the team that conducted the investigation, the number of the site where it

was examined (e.g. 2 for Phuket) and a four-digit number originally given by the Thai recovery teams.

2. Photographs and dental x-rays were taken of each corpse. For non-edentulous bodies, two bitewings were taken. Apical x-rays were performed where endodontic treatments, fixed prostheses and/or implants were present. A dental chart was completed for every victim, using the Interpol identification forms.[79]

3. Two of the healthiest teeth were extracted and stored for future biogenetic analysis, though this later proved to be largely ineffective and samples were taken from the femur.[80]

4. The corpse would then be examined by a pathologist and identifying features such as scars, tattoos, presence of bodily piercings or medical prostheses, etc. were recorded.

5. The reports of the various specialists were compiled and filed.

6. A summary report was typed for every victim examined.

7. Finally, an electronic chip was placed in the maxillary sinus of the victim before they were wrapped and stored in a cool container.

The international DVI mission was originally hindered, likely due to the confusion of the many foreign teams' arrival in what was a chaotic aftermath of the tsunami event. The difficulties experienced with the arrival of international forensic teams have been conservatively described as an initial misunderstanding between the arriving teams and the national local team that was only cleared by the intervention of high level diplomatic measures.[81] The ante-mortem data collection, a vital part of the identification process, was delayed by unclear instructions regarding which protocol was to be followed. A German forensic team reported on the situation in Krabi, where Thai forensic team members felt that the flow of information was only one way. The clash was procedural as 'the administrative authority was in Thai hands, while the foreign experts possessed the professional authority'.[82]

Fingerprint data were entered into the automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS) and searches were run daily to try and find possible matches rather than producing direct identification.[83] At first, however, only about 600 bodies had fingerprints taken. AFIS presented problems of application due to the fact that most bodies had been immersed in salt water and the outer layer of skin had come off the hands, meaning that the prints taken were from a second layer of dermis and thus smaller and less detailed than those taken from the epidermis.[84] The computer had difficulty matching the ante- and post-mortem sets of prints. A later sharing of good practice meant that fingerprints came to be useful once more and proved useful for identifying Thai victims more so than dental evidence.

Data for identification – DNA, dental radiographs, etc. – are collected with a specific goal, but can, paradoxically, also be understood as independent of intention, able to stand against and contradict false truth claims.[85] The concept of evidence provides a means to negotiate the apparent 'bifurcation of anthropology into "scientific" and "poetic" camps'.[86]

> In tracing the network of evidential relations around the dead they create a hybrid space in which new forms of scholarship can be imagined, which cut across old disciplinary divisions, including those of our own anthropological field.[87]

DNA proved not to be an effective piece of evidence for identifying the victims, particularly for Westerners of whom the majority were identified by forensic odontology. For example, the Danish DVI Readiness group was successful in obtaining identification for all but one of the thirty-eight Danes registered missing.[88] Forensic odontology alone was responsible for seventy per cent of the identifications, and in two more cases used in conjunction with fingerprints. There were several reasons why DNA-typing was not successful in identification. One was the length of time before DNA-typing was available, meaning that other means such as dental and fingerprint records of the deceased were used.[89] DNA was initially collected from teeth taken from the body, but the samples

were not of good enough quality to obtain sufficient material to conduct DNA-typing. Towards the end of the main Thai identification process the TTVI decided to have the DNA analysed at a number of international laboratories, including at the International Commission on Missing Persons in Sarajevo.[90] Only at this stage did the process achieve results good enough that large scale identification work could be done.[91]

Necropolitics, thanatopolitics, and thanatocracy

Necropolitics, as operating in the quest for the modern — exactly like biopolitics — produce certain kinds of subjects, but these are always multiple within one kind.[92] Human beings and their becoming subjects[93] find an expression through the process of confronting death.[94] The unidentifiable victims of the tsunami are new forms of multiple subjectivities.

We can broadly consider thanatopolitics as the management of populations by reversing biopolitics. The politics of life conduct or the conduct of life is no longer at the centre of governmental control, but the conduct of/in death. For example, in the identification process bodies for which clear dental records were available were better-behaving cadavers than bodies with no such medical records. Related to actual economic capacity, the production of these records reflects a division between wealthy and non-wealthy victims. Miriam Ticktin, in reference to DNA testing as a dual regime of truth, stated 'different epistemologies and disciplinary practices are used both to govern and produce different populations'.[95]

Control on agency goes beyond death in the form of an attempt to control the process of decomposition. Bodies rebel attempts to be frozen in time (both metaphorically and literally). While the material destruction of human bodies and populations has been defined as the core aspect of necropolitics,[96] we can also read the desperate attempt to halt that destruction when it is the body that takes it further, as an expression of necropolitics. This post-mortem unruly agency can be construed as cadaveric counterconduct.

Referring to Hertz's term of the 'sacred'[97] as 'set apart' or not belonging to 'the everyday or profane world', Hockey and Draper[98] discuss the status of certain bodies as between object and person, especially those that break down social identity by the breaking down of bodily boundaries.[99]

> Thus the material body is not simply core to the conditions of possibility for social identity; it also has the capacity to undermine, disrupt or erase it.[100]

Through this process of undermining or laying the conditions of sociality's production, some bodies matter and other bodies do not, or at least matter less. Dead bodies are repositories of truths that would otherwise be contended in political conflict; autopsies adjudicate truth.[101] Loss of the bodies' materiality, loss of 'the connection between the bodies and body politics', ultimately leads to loss of reality and the bodies' reduction to commodities.[102]

Body politics will increasingly be at the centre 'of our scientific and political cultures'.[103] In the case of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago and the massive effort put on the medical examiners to determine the cause of about 700 deaths in one week, the focus on the body and the 'putatively natural disaster' became the tool to dismiss the social, ethnoracial truth of whom the victims were.[104]

> The social nature of death, in disasters as well as normal conditions, escapes the categories and classifications of modern states and societies.[105]

Biology is taken as a focus to obfuscate other dimensions, whereas it really 'takes shape at the intersection of circuits of capital, and regimes of governance such as humanitarianism which are connected to biomedicine and biotechnology'.[106] One of the principles of the body politic is that 'the concept of the body politic entails the creation of a logically coherent monstrosity'.[107] Although

the theratological effects of a difformed political order were historically represented as generating multiplicity (two-headed states, etc.),[108] we propose that the monstrosity generated by the tsunami lies in the all-identical bodies that erased any semblance of the body politic, producing an incoherent monstrosity in its anatomical and physiognomical uniformity. A Belgian pathologist described how foreign forensic teams were almost obsessed about separating the Western from the Asian corpses, even securing areas in the make-shift morgue and identification centre in Wat Yanyao where they could examine only Western bodies.[109] From such testimonies we can evince the presence of a concern regarding an imperceptible sense of 'identity contamination' that could emerge from mixing these bodies.

The concept of necroeconomy, describing the process of calculating a lesser evil as better than a greater evil in the context of war and conflict, can also be deployed to analyse humanitarian aid.[110] We employ the concept here to describe a scenario characterised by an imbalance in economic resources and technological expertise that is reflected in the capacity to manage down a disordering death into identity files, for example by determining who should be temporarily buried.

> The way the dead are treated in contemporary societies generally reflects their standing while they were alive . . . the social hierarchy of the living was reflected in the hierarchy of the dead.[111]

In Roberto Esposito's philosophical work,[112] the analysis of medical capillary involvement in the Nazi project focuses on the authority of verification through a series of bureaucratic actions and production of procedures, described in terms of 'biocracy'.[113] Beyond being identified, the body is also produced via the forensic identification process.

> Simultaneously productive and delineative, identification constitutes the body of the missing soldier as both object of scientific knowledge and as cultural product, thereby achieving the

> re-inscription of boundaries necessary to compensate for the fragmentation of recovered remains.[114]

Because of the capillary bureaucratic control characterising the forensic identification process, we propose to use the term 'thanatocracy'.[115] Michel Serres introduced this concept 'to name our disappointment in the redeeming virtues of science' and to describe 'the association of the military, scientists, and businessmen'.[116] We use it here to signal that the landscape of the tsunami's aftermath was governed by the processes of death and decomposition, to point out that this processual reality was reframing mass death as eminently bureaucratic, and that the faith in sophisticated forensic techniques seemed to reinvest in those 'virtues of science'. It maintained the association of the military and scientists. This process extended beyond the individual body.[117] The process traversing the body politic is here different from the medical analogy proposed in political philosophy of the sovereign as healer. If 'healing, then, bears some essential relation to governing'[118] what kind of essential relation is born by forensic identification?

> The body politic is constituted on its dissolution, the shaping of a collective, living body that always exists in relation to the corpse (*nekros*) . . . In a sense, the central problematic of the body politic is this ontomedical revenant, the body that remains. In other words, the primary concern of the body politic is neither a theology of spirit not a physiology of organism, not a physics of mechanism, but rather a necrology of the corpse.[119]

Multiple samples from a body (soft tissue, bone) could either confirm or be at odds with an authentic profile detected from ante-mortem material.[120] Zehner analysed one case in which the corpse's soft tissue carried alien genetic material (even in the bone marrow) identifying the victim as a woman while its bone tissue would correspond to the male identity of an ante-mortem yellow form.[121] A body becomes a crossroads of distinct identities, often the result of contamination during

the retrieval and handling process so that the task at hand is to re-establish authenticity.[122] Citing Foucault, Tacker contends that it is the problem of 'management and regulation of multiplicities' that threatens the body politic in the form of epidemics, pestilences and plagues.[123] But rather than the circulation of individual bodies, the management problem, in the case of the tsunami, regards regulating the circulation and multiplicity of fragmented and possibly contaminated genetic material. And if it is neither juridical sovereignty (leprosy), nor disciplinary power (plague), nor *dispositif de sécurité*/apparatus of security (smallpox), what type of power and what political challenge are fielded by mass forensic identification? It is again a question of managing the circulation of multiplicity.

> [Multiplicity] is both constituted by and exists through its circulations and flows, by its passing-through, its passing-between, even its passing-beyond—movements that are, at least in cases of pestilence, plague, and epidemic, both the constitution and the dissolution of the body politic.[124]

A similar quest for defining authenticity underscores the process of recovering bodies of MIA US soldiers in Vietnam, where the first task is to define the nationality of remains through a re-inscription of the body's borders.[125]

> This need to re-inscribe borders might likewise be said to extend to the American body politic as a result of the extreme divisiveness of the Vietnam War. As the body of the individual MIA is fragmented and complex, so too is the American body politic still fragmented and wounded by the war.[126]

We claim a similar process took place in Thailand where the identification reconstituted national body politics that had become indistinct.

> Through its ability to make sense of the fragmented body, the science of forensics effectively creates the unified body of the returned American soldier by permitting the various parts of the unaccounted-for body to stand in for the whole.[127]

The identification process can be seen as a victory over a lost war[128] (or in the case of Thailand over horrifying mass death). It re-established individual identities where the disaster made masses, which is the way migrant bodies are usually considered, as masses, individuality being reserved for the 'modern liberal subject'.[129] Biology is the domain of strategy.[130] Tracing back to ancient Greece the practice to inscribe truth on a slave's body, Ticktin contends that '[t]he body is a source of authentication in situations where the subject is conceived of as unable to provide a reasoned, spoken truth'.[131] Tsunami victims were unable to provide their spoken truth.

Conclusive remarks

The tsunami disaster and the following forensic identification process was one of the biggest mediatic events of the beginning of the twenty-first century. The presence of the media also brought about unnecessary pressure on the DVI teams, with what Perrier *et al*. describe as an 'intrusive and almost uncontrolled omnipresence'.[132] Within weeks local markets in both Indonesia and Thailand offered for sale a series of videos, some with visits to post-tsunami wrecked coastal areas, others with gruesome footages of body retrievals and morgues, with access to temples where bodies were collected.[133] When bodies are fetishised by media and made into spectacles, and made by political and scientific discourse into the subject of official debates and definitions, they stand in for the social and convey social information.[134] As in the Chicago heat wave of 1995, bodies 'become subjects of spectacle, commodified materials for selling stories rather than substantive remains'.[135] In the age of the Internet the bodies also become agents of spectacle and horror that can continue

beyond the 'life' of the news story. The Internet preserves the images at once accessible and immutable.

> Transformed into just the next set of news offerings, the dead bodies were in effect derealised, first for the reporters whose job was to repackage them as spectacles, and then for the readers who consume them, along with breakfast or dinner, until the next news cycle comes.[136]

Images of dead bodies can provoke powerful and compelling emotional responses[137] and not simply because of the shock of seeing something that is normally kept out of view. The dead are recognised as evidence of death, or the passing of someone who is missing and missed.

> These [social] relationships are not self-evident, however, but instead make visual use of the body to create complex bodily associations or connections which are highly *mediated*.[138]

Despite attempts to impose ways of identifying the living onto the dead, the body does not acquiesce and is guided by different rules that make its containment difficult. This cadaveric agency and counterconduct resists the imposition of boundaries fielded as strategy to create a bounded identity or, we could say, a coherent body.[139] While we can refer to literature investigating the constitution of a coherent living body as 'object' of political and medical intervention, here we look at the attempt to produce a 'coherent decomposing body'. Coherence was suggested by the use of administrative technologies, such as the allocation of Interpol DVI procedure. Reaffirming the cogency of the individual body went hand in hand with the attempt to establish a coherence of the body politic by re-drawing national boundaries into forms and into the corpses themselves. Methods to contain the dissolving bodies, freezing them, analysing them and storing them in body bags speak also of a desperate attempt to distinguish their respective body politic. The identities to be

established could also be a way to establish an ontology, an onto-praxis.[140] The indistinction of identities, between 'us' and 'them' would seem to evoke a relational non-dualist kind of ontology: 'Accordingly, there is likewise no static being for relational non-dualists, only a continuous flux of transformative becoming'.[141]

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[1] The estimated magnitude by the US Geological Service was initially calculated as 9.1.

[2] The term refers to the procedures used to positively identify deceased individuals resulting from a mass casualty event.

[3] K. Tun, B. Burcher, P. Sribanditmongkol, T. Brondolo, T. Caragine, C. Perera & K. Kent, 'Panel 2.16: Forensic Aspects of Disaster Fatality Management', *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 20:6 (2005), 455–8; J. Scanlon, 'Identifying the Tsunami Dead in Thailand and Sri Lanka: Multi-National Emergent Organisations', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 26:1 (2008), 1–18.

[4] S. Black, 'Disaster Anthropology: The 2004 Asian Tsunami', in S. Blau & D. H. Ubelaker (eds), *Handbook of Forensic Anthropology and Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press, 2009), pp. 397–406.

[5] This aspect was perceived by local villagers in Satun province (where there were few local casualties) almost as a specific form of violation inflicted on the body. See C. Merli, 'Religious Interpretations of Tsunami in Satun Province, Southern Thailand: Reflections on Ethnographic and Visual Materials', *Svensk Religionshistorisk Årsskrift*, 14 (2005), 154–81.

[6] M. Perrier, M. Bollmann, A. Girod & P. Mangin, 'Swiss DVI at the Tsunami Disaster: Expect the Unexpected', *Forensic Science International*, 159S (2006), S30–2; the centre at Wat Yanyao temple in Takua Pa was led by Dr. Pornthip Rojanasunan of the Central Institute of Forensic Science in the Thai Ministry of Justice; the morgue in Krabi treated the bodies from Phi-Phi area. See E. Cohen, 'Death in Paradise: Tourist Fatalities in the Tsunami Disaster in Thailand', *Current Issues in Tourism*, 12:2 (2009), 183–99, 191–3.

[7] A. Mbembé, 'Necropolitics' (trans. L. Meintjes), *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11–40.

[8] O. W. Morgan, P. Sribanditmongkol, C. Perera, Y. Sulasmi, D. Van Alphen & E. Sondorp, 'Mass Fatality Management Following the South Asian Tsunami Disaster: Case Studies in Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka', *PLOS Medicine*, 3:6 (2006), e195.

[9] P. Sribanditmongkol, P. Pongpanitanont, N. Porntrakulseree, M. Petju, S. Kunaratanapruk, P. Kitkailass, P. Ganjanarintr & N. Somboonsub, 'Forensic Aspect of Disaster Casualty Management: Tsunami Victim Identification in Thailand', *World Health Organisation Conference on Health Aspects of the Tsunami Disaster in Asia,* Phuket, Thailand, 4–6 May 2005.

[10] Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[11] For example at Krabi there were teams originating from Thailand, Japan, Portugal, Chile, Canada, Italy and Israel. See R. Lessig & M. Rothschild, 'International Standards in Cases of Mass Disaster Victim Identification (DVI)', *Forensic Science Medicine and Pathology*, 8 (2012), 197–9; Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[12] Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'; Sribanditmongkol *et al*., 'Forensic Aspect of Disaster Casualty Management'.

[13] M. Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Paris, Éditions Gallimard et Éditions du Seuil, 2004a); *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977–1978* (Paris, Éditions Gallimard et Éditions du Seuil, 2004b).

[14] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[15] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'; Tun *et al*., 'Panel 2:16'.

[16] J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London & New York, Verso, 2004).

[17] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[18] Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[19] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'; Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[20] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'; R. Lessig, C. Grundmann, F. Dahlmann, K. Rotzcher, J. Edelmann & P. M. Schneider, 'Tsunami 2004 – A Review of One Year of Continuous Forensic Medical Work for Victim Identification', *EXCLI Journal*, 5 (2006), 128–39; Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[21] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise'.

[22] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[23] *Ibid*.; Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 192.

[24] C. Perera, 'After the Tsunami: Legal Implications of Mass Burials of Unidentified Victims in Sri Lanka', *PLOS Medicine*, 2:6 (2005), e185.

[25] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 189–90; Tun *et al*., 'Panel 2:16'.

[28] Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[29] Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 32–4.

[30] Lessig & Rothschild, 'International Standards'.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 193.

[33] Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[34] M. Petju, A. Suteerayongprasert, R. Thongpud & K. Hassiri, 'Importance of Dental Records for Victim Identification Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster in Thailand', *Public Health*, 121 (2007), 251–7, 252.

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] M. P. Schou & P. J. T. Knudsen, 'The Danish Disaster Victim Identification Effort in the Thai Tsunami: Organisation and Results', *Forensic Science Medicine and Pathology* 8 (2012), 125–30, 126.

[37] Lessig *et al*., 'Tsunami 2004', 131.

[38] Petju *et al*., 'Importance of Dental Records', 253.

[39] INTERPOL, *Tsunami Evaluation Working Group. The DVI Response to the South East Asian Tsunami between December 2004 and February 2006* (INTERPOL, 2010), p. 91.

[40] J. Hockey & J. Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb: Identity, (Dis)embodiment and the Life Course', *Body & Society*, 11:2 (2005), 41–57, 45.

[41] Lessig *et al*., 'Tsunami 2004', 133.

[42] Z. Crossland, 'Evidential Regimes of Forensic Archaeology', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 42 (2013), 121–37.

[43] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 191.

[44] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 193; Morgan *et al*., 'Mass Fatality Management'.

[45] Tun *et al*., 'Panel 2:16'.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] Scanlon, 'Identifying the Tsunami Dead'.

[48] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 191; Scanlon, 'Identifying the Tsunami Dead'.

[49] The response of the media over the treatment (or initially non-treatment) of the victims of the Malaysian Airline carrier shot down over the Ukraine on 17 July 2014 illustrates this process well and highlights the important political and socio-cultural implications of the need for identification.

[50] See Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 190.

[51] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 195.

[52] M. J. Casper & L. J. Moore, *Missing Bodies: The Politics Of Visibility* (New York & London, New York University Press, 2009), p. 179.

[53] E. Thacker, 'Necrologies: Or, the Death of the Body Politic', in P. Ticineto Clough & C. Willse (eds), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays On the Governance Of Life and Death* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 139–62, 140, 147.

[54] T. M. Hawley, 'Bodies and Border Practices: The Search for American MIAs in Vietnam', *Body & Society*, 8:3 (2002), 49–69, 52.

[55] Perrier *et al*., 'Swiss DVI', S 32.

[56] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] M. Tsokos, R. Lessig, C. Grundmann, S. Benthaus & O. Peschel, 'Experiences in Tsunami Victim Identification', *International Journal of Legal Medicine*, 120 (2006), 185–7.

[59] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', 41.

[60] R. Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London, Routledge, 2004); see also R. Gowland & T. Thompson, *Human Identity and Identification* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[61] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', 47.

[62] *Ibid.*, 48.

[63] *Ibid.*, 49.

[64] E. Klinenberg, 'Bodies that Don't Matter: Death and Dereliction in Chicago', *Body & Society*, 7:2–3 (2001), 121–36.

[65] *Ibid.*, 123.

[66] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', 51, 53.

[67] J. R. McCarthy & R. Prokhovnik, 'Embodied Relationality and Caring After Death', *Body and Society*, 20:2 (2014), 18–43, 25.

[68] Casper & Moore, *Missing Bodies*, p. 186.

[69] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'; Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 191.

[70] Black, 'Disaster Anthropology'.

[71] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 191–2.

[72] Hawley, 'Bodies and Border Practices', 53.

[73] See discussion in *Ibid*.

[74] *Ibid*., 58.

[75] Note that the USA sent two forensic teams from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), including 'a Hawaii-based unit best known for its efforts to find and identify U.S. soldiers missing in action'. A. Marshall, 'Naming the dead', *TIME*, 17 January 2005, 34–6.

[76] Thacker, 'Necrologies', p. 149.

[77] L. Cohen, 'Operability: Surgery at the Margins of the State', in V. Das & D. Poole (eds), *Anthropology at the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, SAR Press, 2004); M. Ticktin, 'How Biology Travels: A Humanitarian Trip', *Body & Society*, 17:2–3 (2011), 139–58, 155.

[78] See Perrier *et al*., 'Swiss DVI'.

[79] D. O. C. Sweet, 'INTERPOL DVI Best-Practice Standards – An Overview', *Forensic Science International* 201 (2010), 18–21.

[80] Lessig *et al*., 'Tsunami 2004'.

[81] Perrier *et al*., 'Swiss DVI'.

[82] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 193.

[83] Scanlon, 'Identifying the Tsunami Dead'.

[84] *Ibid.*

[85] L. Daston, 'Marvelous facts and miraculous evidence in early modern Europe', in J. Chandler, A. I. Davidson & H. Harrootunian (eds), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice and Persuasion Across the Disciplines* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press), pp. 243–74.

[86] M. Engelke, 'The Objects of Evidence', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14:s1 (2008), S1–S21, 57.

[87] Crossland, 'Evidential Regimes', p. 131.

[88] Schou & Knudsen, 'The Danish DVI Effort'.

[89] *Ibid.*

[90] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 194; Schou & Knudsen, 'The Danish DVI Effort'.

[91] *Ibid.*

[92] Casper & Moore, *Missing Bodies*, pp. 179–80.

[93] Thacker, 'Necrologies'.

[94] Casper & Moore, *Missing Bodies*, p. 13; Mbembé, 'Necropolitics'.

[95] Ticktin, 'How Biology Travels', 141.

[96] Mbembé, 'Necropolitics'.

[97] R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (New York, Free Press, 1960 [1907]).

[98] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', 46.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 47; J. Lawton, *The Dying Process: Patients' Experiences of Palliative Care* (London, Routledge, 2000).

[100] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', p. 52.

[101] Klinenberg, 'Bodies That Don't Matter'.

[102] *Ibid.*, 130.

[103] *Ibid.*, 122.

[104] *Ibid.*, 123.

[105] *Ibid.*, 132.

[106] Ticktin, 'How Biology Travels', 141.

[107] Thacker, 'Necrologies', 146, original in italics.

[108] *Ibid*., 149ff.

[109] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 192.

[110] E. Weizman, 'Thanato-tactics', in P. Ticineto Clough & C. Willse (eds), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 177–210.

[111] Cohen, 'Death in Paradise', 184, 196.

[112] R. Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (trans. T. Campbell) (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2008 [2004]).

[113] *Ibid*.

[114] Hawley, 'Bodies and Border Practices', 57.

[115] M. Serres, 'Betrayal: The Thanatocracy (1974)', *Public*, 24:48 (2013), 19–40.

[116] B. Latour, *The Pasteurization Of France* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 5, 251.

[117] Judith Butler sees in the new forms of power associated with the proliferation of administrative bureaucracies instituted by the US government after 9/11 a re-emergence of a sovereignty that suspends and limits the jurisdiction of law in a context of governmentality; Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 50ff.

[118] Thacker, 'Necrologies', 150.

[119] *Ibid*., 151.

[120] R. Zehner, '"Foreign" DNA in Tissue Adherent to Compact Bone from Tsunami Victims', *Forensic Science International: Genetics*, 1:2 (2007), 218–22.

[121] *Ibid*., 220.

[122] This situation conflicts with the increasing reliance on the body as the ultimate source of truth, for example in DNA testing of migrants for family reunion and in physical evidence of torture in France; Ticktin, 'How Biology Travels'; D. Fassin & E. D'Halluin, 'The Truth from the Body', *American Anthropologist*, 107:4 (2005), 597–608.

[123] Thacker, 'Necrologies', 152.

[124] *Ibid*., 153.

[125] Hawley, 'Bodies and Border Practices'.

[126] *Ibid*., 51.

[127] *Ibid*., 55.

[128] *Ibid*.

[129] Ticktin, 'How Biology Travels', 146–7.

[130] *Ibid*., 147.

[131] *Ibid*., 153.

[132] Perrier *et al*., 'Swiss DVI', S32.

[133] See Merli, 'Religious Interpretations'.

[134] Klinenberg, 'Bodies That Don't Matter', 122.

[135] *Ibid.*, 130.

[136] *Ibid.*, 130.

[137] Crossland, 'Evidential Regimes'.

[138] Hockey & Draper, 'Beyond the Womb and the Tomb', 51.

[139] Our discussion about a coherent body draws from different sources, which ultimately address the inextricable link between the body politic and the human body. It refers broadly to John Locke's political theory where the Commonwealth is portrayed as 'a coherent living body', and to medical anthropological studies of the body in biomedicine, specifically A. Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2002), p. 61; and N. Scheper-Hughes & M. M. Lock, 'The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1:1 (1987), 6–41.

[140] M. W. Scott, 'The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?)', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 19:4 (2013), 859–72.

[141] *Ibid.*, 864.